













# The Torpedo under the Ark

"Ibsen and Women"

by  
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Authorized translation from the  
Swedish by  
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## THE TORPEDO UNDER THE ARK

"IBSEN AND WOMEN"

By Ellen Key.

*"To My Friend the Revolutionist."  
"To shift the chessmen is no affair of  
mine. To upset the chess-board—there  
you have me absolutely . . . . You  
invoke a deluge to sweep the world.  
With joy I lay my torpedo under the ark."*

HENRIK IBSEN—

In my eighteenth year, my mother  
made me happy with three books. Up-  
on the covers I read:

"The Comedy of Love."

"Brand."

"Peer Gynt."

I knew that Ibsen was a new Nor-  
wegian poet but my knowledge, like

that of most Swedish readers in 1868, was limited to that fact. It was then with the real joy of a discoverer that I buried myself in the new world of poetry and ideas which "Brand" and "Peer Gynt" revealed to me. In the "Comedy of Love," however, I found myself in the sphere of my own dearest thoughts. That is to say, five years before, "The Bailiff's Daughter" had become one of my devotional books. It is in this splendid work of Camilla Collett\*, that Ibsen, according to his own testimony, found part of the metal which he afterward, in "The Comedy of Love," formed into piercing arrows and singing strains. The delight with which I read and re-read "The Comedy of Love," may best be depicted if I mention that—when immediately afterwards

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\*The first great Norwegian feminist and sister of Henrik Wegeland, the great poet of Norway, in the years 1830-40.

I fell seriously ill—it transpired that I had unconsciously committed to memory almost the entire poem. My fever fantasies were filled with its personages; my pulse seemed to beat in the rhythm of Ibsen's verse and my recovery was delayed because my brain found no rest from the sharp thrusts of these keen retorts.

This experience seems to be typical—in an intensified degree certainly—of the spell which is the most universal form of Ibsen's power over the soul.

I already understood that Camilla Collett's influence upon Ibsen was such as happens only between those spiritually related, and that Ibsen, through her book, was confirmed in the pathos, the tragic conception, which was his peculiar characteristic. This pathos impressed me more forcibly in "Brand" and in "Peer Gynt." But "The Comedy of Love" had sprung

from the same absolute demand for entirety as the two more powerful works. And the sphere in which Ibsen, in this poem of his youth, raised this demand for completeness, was that in which all my innermost instincts, the aspirations of my soul, had prepared a harmony with his exalted idealism.

Camilla Collett had given voice, in the North, to the heart-sick lament of women over the social customs which stifle the deepest, finest and strongest in woman's being and which violate the law of her erotic nature.

"The Comedy of Love" was the answer of a man to this woman's cry; of a man who hated the erotic abuses and customs quite as fervently; who understood quite as deeply that it is "Upon the ruins of the temple of womanly love that the husband most often builds his house."\*

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\*Camilla Collett.

answer of a man who felt with the same bitterness that the finest growths of life are trampled down by flat-footed conventionalism—that its most delicate possibilities of happiness are crushed between the hard, inexorable hands of society's moral codes.

Already in the "Comedy of Love" Ibsen was the able moralist, who without difficulty resisted the temptation to create "dreamy realms of beauty," although he knew that this was what the time craved. But he knew also that such new kingdoms are not attained without man's first possessing the courage to abide in the kingdom which is,—the kingdom of reality; the courage to test the worth of the life-values for which men still strive, the views of life which they still hold Sacred, and the bonds which still unite society; the courage to sound the depths of

the conflicts which still rend the soul and to put all to the proof in order to sanction it or to recognize it as worthless. Ibsen was practically the first of his contemporaries to have the courage to examine the threads of the "torn web of life." Thereby he became deeply and permanently convinced that the value of existence for the individual and the worth of the individual for existence depend exclusively upon the completeness of the passion with which each surrenders himself to that which is for him the highest value of life and which he recognizes as his ideal.

Ibsen showed himself in the "Comedy of Love," above all, the keen sighted moralist, when he began his unmasking of society's incompleteness by laying bare the instability of the marriage institution which he calls "The Tragicomic Miracle of Harlequin," wherein

the whole world falsifies. Honor lends itself to falsification before the moral and happiness-giving values of social customs and laws, and also before the decisions due to our trend toward ethical concepts. In this way have men transformed the highest possibility of life's happiness into a "secret refuge from disgust of life;"\* and further, through making legal claims to conjugal ownership, have they turned the innermost expression of personal freedom into a lifelong captivity. Ibsen began, in the "Comedy of Love," his life-long warfare against that idealism for which "the ideal itself is secondary"—if only the forms are the old ones, *called idealistic* by church and state.

It is not likely that Ibsen, even in the splendid, seething temerity of his

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\*Camilla Collett on Marriage.

youth, overlooked the deep-lying social and psychological motives of this social "ideal." But the aim of the great moralist is not to depict the rise of institutions. His aim is to show their actual effects, to point to "The Corpse in the Cargo"\* without considering that this corpse was once living; to establish his new ethical claims, indifferent whether the individual can support them or whether he must break down under their weight.

It was the claim of personality for which Ibsen found no place in "Felicity's Temperance-Union," as he called the actual marriage; and this union he therefore mercilessly derides from the time of love-betrothal during which the aunts and friends "strangle the poetry of love" and the lovers themselves suffer that "their precious capital

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\*A poem of Ibsen's has this title.



be shared by an hundred hands," up to the time of the dulled, calloused routine of married life wherein they do not even remember the emotion of their youthful love, yet bring a flock of children into the world and gorge them with conceptions of duty and idealistic beliefs "for use when the time of soul-slaughter begins" for this new generation as for its fathers and mothers.

When Ibsen, in the "Comedy of Love," for the first time spoke out fully in his own way calling things by their right names, he wounded society in its blindest prejudices, which it always calls its "holiest feelings." The result was that persecution from which he fled after a fruitless struggle to be accepted in Norway.

At all prophets, stones are thrown—they show themselves, then, true prophets by "their ability to erect statues

of the stones.”\* Ibsen has erected many such statues. Among these, it seems to me, some of the women were handled with especial partiality.

Ibsen, who aims at and often reaches the heart of things, has made a discovery in regard to women, gained a new point of view, which he afterwards so strongly emphasized that many were led to call Ibsen a biased glorifier of women.

Nothing is less true. Ibsen cordially hated the feminine herd—the throng—“which in the general chorus follows the beat of convention.” He has also with scientific accuracy observed the *genus feminum* of the zoological species found in the ark under which he lays his torpedo.

But he has also made other observations and found among certain women

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\*Hebbel.

a great trait. It is this trait which makes woman seem truly dearer to the heart of the poet than is man.

Ibsen saw that she brings to her one great ideal a greater, more personal devotion than does man; that in her domain, that of feeling, she evinces a more passionate zeal to challenge life's lies, "to rip open the machine-made seam," to "upset the chess-board, not merely to shift the chessmen;"\* that she stands more upright, more inflexible than man, when the evil "spirit of concession" demands submission; that she cannot so easily divide herself between a public and an individual morale.

To be less a creature of society, more a natural force than man—this is the quality which makes woman, in Ibsen's eyes, a being more vigorous, full-

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\*Ibsen in "Ghosts" and in the poem quoted.

blooded, better qualified for life, with greater demands for life, more desirous of reality, more consumed with an ardent longing for entirety than is man.

Human souls can be divided into organic and inorganic. The latter can be crystalized in many forms, cut into numerous facets, polished into brilliant surfaces, moulded into beautiful statues—but in their naturally or artificially fashioned shape, they keep their form, they are finished; they wane not, they wax not. The organic beings, on the contrary, may fade, be crushed, may send forth fresh shoots and blossom often at most unexpected times; they are to a certain extent incalculable, because they are growing.

Ibsen more frequently makes the masculine soul inorganic, definitive, finished, determined; the feminine soul, on the other hand, he more often makes organic, growing, in evolution.

These latter are the souls which gradually find their milieu too confined, which sooner or later must revolt, if they wish to develop into a greater, more beautiful humanity, into a richer personality.

The phenomenon in human life, for which Ibsen most keenly watches and which he loves, is exactly that rupture, that revolt, that struggle for freedom. The result attained each time interests him little in itself. For, as he said to Brandes in a letter invaluable for an understanding of Ibsen: "The conception of liberty is extended in its claims; the newly attained, higher conception of morality has no eternity in itself. Yes, not even the most evident syllogisms are absolute truths. For who can affirm that, upon the planet of Jupiter,  $2 \times 2$  do not equal 5?"

But although Ibsen cannot thus

regard the conclusions of woman as infallible, yet he believes that woman, struggling for the independence of her personality, in her sphere—that of love—has the highest possibilities of finding the greatest *relative* truths; because the ideal longing, the dream to encounter there “the wonderful”\* never leaves her at peace. The man, who may be in all respects her equal by birth, can yet feel at harmony with himself in the daily comfort of a marriage in which nothing is lacking except—the deep, personal life-content that unites souls, which either never existed or has withered away! The woman of highly developed personality, on the contrary, feels herself degraded in such a marriage.

Ibsen has never, in any drama in which the relations between a man and

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\*Nora in “Doll’s House.”

a woman are thrown into relief, made the relation a truly happy one. The reason is in most cases that the man shows himself insufficient. It is the woman who has wholly desired, wholly loved, yes, often wholly sinned. Almost invariably it is the woman who breaks out of the cage, or the ark, or the doll-house. And he believes that she, without the barriers, will find her right road, led by a surer instinct than man. She, less than he, needs to submit to the social moral code; for her greater power of devoting herself wholly endows her with a nobler instinct and therewith the right to a greater ethical freedom of choice. And here is perhaps the reason why all of Ibsen's noblest women give themselves without hesitation, without hesitation take themselves back and follow unswervingly their own course when they have found it, or always find it again, if they stray from it.

For Ibsen there is no higher moral gospel than the assertion of the true personality, no higher moral law than the devotion of the personality to its ideal. For him, as for Nietzsche, the supreme proof of the superman is the power to stand alone; to be able, in every individual case, to make his own choice; in action to write anew his own law, choose his own sacrifices, run his own dangers, win his own freedom, venture his own destruction, choose his own happiness.

It is usually the man who, according to Ibsen, bends to the traditional conception of right although it be a conception which is for him untenable. It is the man who crumbles his life away deedless, in idle brooding, or who is broken through incontinent desire for power. But not even these men with lust for power have the "robust conscience"\* which chooses or



adheres to a new ethical point of view. The men therefore often drag down to their own level of incompleteness and indecision the women who have surrendered themselves to them; or they betray them at the supreme, critical moment of life.

But the women who have sinned against the innermost law of their personality, these Ibsen rarely allows to die in their sin, but sooner or later they recognize their fault and—sometimes—atone for it.

If Ibsen depicts a woman absolutely without will, then he represents her as hypnotized.† If he paints a woman absolutely incapable of devotion, then he gives her at least energy enough to deliver the world from its most useless burden by taking her life.‡ Ibsen's

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\*See "The Master Builder," Solness.

†"The Lady From The Sea."

‡Hedda Gabler.

most remarkable women are all without scruples, but this lack has his full sympathy. For it has a warm blooded aim: to win happiness for themselves by assuring the happiness—or the freedom—of the man to whom they have consecrated their complete devotion, whether it be their lover, their husband or their son. And this hardihood which no consideration arrests, is founded, in the last analysis, upon the courage to suffer the consequences of their audacious intervention in their own or another's destiny. For Ibsen, this intrepid woman is personified anarchy.

In the "Comedy of Love" he breaks out in these words:

"In the 'still realm of thought' none fears bars nor barriers, there no one fears to ply the spur; but *in action*, we keep close to earth, for life is dear to

every man, and no one dares the death leap. Wherefore drive with whip and spur when no golden stake rewards him who tears himself from comfort and security and dashes forth headlong, high on his saddle? Such a chase for love of the chase belongs to the noble."

In the poetry of his more mature years he traced in his women, more often than in his men, this sign of nobility:—the intrepid courage, the noble chase without any utilitarian consideration. And when Ibsen's men ignore or wound or sacrifice these noble women whom destiny has placed at their side, then the poet looks down with unutterable pity and contempt upon the masculine blindness or brutality, pusillanimity or conscientious futility.

In most of Ibsen's works it is the woman who utters the red reply

of the drama—the reply colored not only with the heavy, hot drops from the heart of this one woman, but with the blood of millions of hearts suffering the same woe.

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Woman needs, in a still higher degree than does man, to be awakened by Ibsen to the deliverance of her personality. Just as man she is still continually oppressed by a conception of life which demands annihilation of the ego and by a society which stifles it. But she has been fettered in addition by an archaic ideal of woman which men created after their own desires, for their own convenience and in accordance with which women fashioned themselves. Out of this ideal was engendered the conventional conception that the spirit of sacrifice in woman was the absolutely essential condition of happiness of man and woman, but

that the assertion of her personality was essentially pernicious to that happiness.

Against this ideal of woman many voices were raised before Ibsen. But only when a great poet has incarnated a new thought in living personages does it work in wider circles with the power and might of a revelation. And when Ibsen created his new ideal of woman in the consciousness of the time, it soon became the ideal, not only of woman but of man also. In this sense Ibsen can be called the poet of woman, but not in a more restricted sense, for he purposed to work just as little for the cause of woman as for any other cause. The coming into effect of the new ideal has demanded desperate struggles. But gradually a race of men and women have arisen who, in their married life, as well as in their personal life, have

earnestly sought to realize the freedom of the personality of the woman as well as of the man. Women have summoned ever more courage to take their place beside men, not merely in society but in the home. And the man, as well as the woman, has come to understand how much richer life has become for both, since devotion is expressed by the woman who is in all spheres a personality who *gives* herself, not a being who *abandons* herself.

And since for the first time, woman has begun in practice and in thought to cherish the feeling for personality, it will also in the new race bloom forth with more splendor than has been possible in this period of crisis, whether in man or in woman. Ibsen understands the weakness of woman, but he understands also her strength; he has found it in her heart and knows that

out of the heart comes life. Therefore he shows how the love of a woman can be the salvation of a man, and how, on the other hand, he dries up for himself life's purest fountain of strength, when he "kills the love-life" in a woman.\* In the new realm, where Ibsen is prophet, he has not given to faith and hope the same place which they had in that empire whose sun is setting. Doubt and questioning ("sceptis") are for him greater than faith and hope. But for him also love is ever the greatest, and in his great women he has glorified not only a woman's love but also, at the same time, a new and greater mode of loving.

In almost every conflict of an erotic nature, Ibsen has underscored Camilla Collett's profound words, that "not the man and not the woman ought to

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\*"John Gabriel Borkman," "When the Dead Awake."



choose, but that there is only one thing which is pure enough to be allowed to choose—woman's love."

That woman's love—if the word is taken in its largest, most comprehensive sense—more surely than any other feeling divines the way to the greater happiness for the individual, as well as for the whole race, is Ibsen's great belief regarding woman. He sees her essential nature as *erotic* and *maternal devotion*. From this devotion, to which he pardons everything, he hopes also for everything. He knows that contingencies of a thousand kinds, some of which he has painted in his profound poem, "Transformations," will always obstruct the way of man's chances of happiness; that before the red abysses of the heart, before the obscure, night-enmantled regions of the soul, before the white and black magic of sympathy and antipathy, before the delusive



play of the senses and the blind encounters of chance, woman also stands powerless. But he not only hopes that woman, through the explosive character of her nature, will serve as the best torpedo for the old ark, he believes also that she will succeed in renewing the blood of humanity by means of new life-values, new ethical motives, a new idealism, a new faith. But this can happen only if she develop her own individuality; which implies that she maintain the deep, essential characteristics which distinguish her from man.

Then will all the dream beauty, the depth of presentiment in the soul-life of the modern woman be able to form the future and assume shape in the whole life of man, above all in the erotic union, so that this will maintain its entire strength and soundness through its own content, and preserve an ever increasing freedom and

delicacy in all its forms of expression.

From such a union Ibsen expects that there will be born and reared the new race, whose blood will swell with the passion for entirety and with the energy of action, when it directs its course to that "Third Empire"\*, the realm of beauty, which by the poet himself was seen only as an azure island at the farthest confines of a storm-swept world-sea.

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\*"Emperor and Galilean."











